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GOVERNOR PUTS THE FOCUS ON ENERGY

By Tom Lutey

With alternative-energy projects on the horizon, Montana colleges and universities need to provide training that is so specialized that it's scarcely offered elsewhere, Gov. Brian Schweitzer said Tuesday.

Speaking to educators and alternative-energy operatives in Billings, Schweitzer said high-tech projects such as the $7 billion coal-to-liquids plant slated for the Crow Indian Reservation will create unusual jobs at all pay grades. Montana and other northwestern states are looking for ways to line up post-high school training with whatever the emerging energy industry might need.

Brand new occupation

"We need to make sure Montanans are ready," Schweitzer said at the Montana State University Billings' College of Technology. "Who is going to do this (job) because this is a brand-new occupation?"

Several of the state's smaller colleges and branch universities are already providing training in energy-related fields, the governor said. Students at Montana State University-Northern in Havre are performance testing biofuels. The Great Falls College of Technology offers courses in power line transmission.

This spring, technology students at MSUB can take courses in power plant operation. Instructors will also hit the road with a 38-foot mobile training laboratory to train workers in using instrument controls, operating power plants and welding.

Cedric Black Eagle, vice chairman of the Crow Indian Tribe, said similar training is being developed on the Crow Reservation, where he expects 900 full-time energy industry jobs will be created if the proposed coal-to-liquid plant becomes a reality.

Project 'technologically advanced'

In August, Schweitzer called the coal-to-liquids plant one of the most sophisticated, technologically advanced projects in the world.

But the coal-to-liquid operation known as the Many Stars plant has hurdles in front of it. The project is being developed jointly by the tribe and the Australian-American Energy Co. Concerns ranging from water scarcity to greenhouse gases and a global economic slowdown must be addressed before the plant becomes a reality.

To make sure state colleges are turning out the right kind of workers, Montana is working with the Idaho National Laboratory, a federal energy research center, Idaho State University and the Education Systems and Technology Education Center, or ESTEC, based on Blackfoot, Idaho.

Emerging technology is part of the challenge in assembling a Northwestern work force, said Scott Rasmussen, ESTEC executive director. But an entire generation of energy workers is reaching retirement age with no one immediately available to replace it. ESTEC would like to begin teaching children about the importance of energy production as early as elementary school, and firming up that interest with math and science courses in high schools.